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Hickman's Family Farms will build a farm factory in Tonopah that will open with 2.2 million chickens, and could grow to four times that, despite opposition from residents who say the project blindsided them.

Residents want an environmental-impact study to determine the farm's impact on health and natural resources in the community, which is about 20 miles west of Buckeye.

However, because the land is zoned for agriculture, state agricultural laws allow Hickman's to build the 360-acre farm with few permit requirements and virtually no oversight from the state or Maricopa County.

The District 4 County Supervisor whom residents of the unincorporated area would typically turn to is Clint Hickman, who is part of the family and a co-owner of the business. Hickman said there are four other supervisors residents can contact with concerns about the egg and fertilizer facility.

Signs of opposition line properties along Indian School Road, where



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the farm will be built. A public meeting last month with the Hickmans drew about 400 residents, most of whom were angry and opposed to the plant.

The residents fear their dream lifestyle become a nightmare that includes chicken feces, flies, dead chickens, truck traffic, noise and air pollution. They worry the giant farm could endanger underground water supplies and hot springs, and about the Hickman's use of prison labor.

The rural community's downtown, with a dozen or so businesses, is just off Interstate 10 at Indian School Road and 411th Avenue. The farm will be at Indian School Road between 415th and 419th avenues.

Billy Hickman, a Hickman's co-owner and vice president of operations, said the company has been responsive to residents' concerns, but it appears nothing can appease them except the farm changing locations, which he said isn't going to happen.

Hickman's will break ground on the \$40 million first phase any day, he said

The property was selected because of its proximity to the interstate, making it easier and more cost-effective to ship eggs west to California and east to Phoenix and beyond. It also is near a supply of workers, he said.

The company's first phase will include 2.2 million chickens in seven 30-foot-tall buildings, each with a 45,920-square-foot footprint, and a 35,000-square-foot processing plant. Future phases would each have seven buildings that house 300,000 chickens in each, and would boost the farm's chickens to more than 8 million if there are four phases.

Whether those four phases will be built will depend on the demand for eggs, Billy Hickman said.

Prisoners from the Arizona State Prison Complex-Lewis in Buckeye will do some work at the farm. Hickman said he isn't sure how many prisoners will work in Tonopah because they work with baby chicks, and the babies will be born and raised at Hickman's facility in Arlington

before being sent to Tonopah.

The company has two other chicken farms, one in Maricopa, south of Phoenix, and another in Arlington, southwest of Buckeye, near the Palo Verde Nuclear Plant.

The first phase of the Tonopah facility would require about 18 trucks per 10-hour day, seven days a week. The trucks would haul feed to the Tonopah facility, and transport out eggs, euthanized chickens and manure. Billy Hickman said that would be fewer than two trucks per hour during the workday, and the truck traffic would benefit a nearby truck stop, one of Tonopah's businesses.

At the contentious public meeting in January, many residents were outraged that they weren't given notice and that there weren't public meetings until after the plan was finalized.

Tonopah leaders say they found out about the project in October when someone asked about the project in a Tonopah Valley Community Council meeting, but they were unable to get details until the Hickmans agreed to meet with them in November.

Billy Hickman said company officials closed on the parcel, for which they paid \$10,000 an acre, in November, and informed community leaders nine days later.

Business and land owners say their livelihoods and investments could be destroyed. They point to the Hickmans' chicken and egg farm operation in Arlington, where there have been complaints to the county Air Quality Department about odor and dust.

The Hickmans acknowledge the Arlington plant has problems, but say they will use a different method of chicken farming at the Tonopah farm.

There will be no manure piles outside the Tonopah facility, Billy Hickman said. Chicken feces will be kept inside and shipped out. Chickens past their egg-laying prime will be euthanized and shipped off-site daily to be composted.

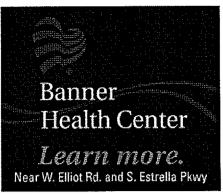
He said Hickman's had not commissioned an environmental study, but the facilities will sit on concrete and will not harm water supplies.

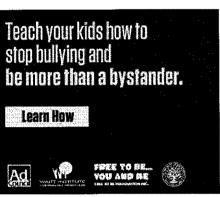
## Locals oppose farm

The Tonopah Valley Community Council and Tonopah Valley Association, made up of residents, farmers and business owners, oppose the Hickman's operation being placed in Tonopah, which they say is a unique community.

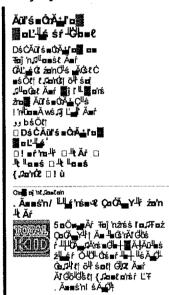
Tonopah is said to mean "hot water under the bush," which refers to its geothermal water heated from the Earth's interior. A subterranean fault is the heat source that provides water to El Dorado Hot Springs, a business half a mile east of the proposed Hickman's facility, manager Matt Kamowski said.

Visitors travel there to soak in the healing waters while taking in the views of Saddle Mountain and the Palo Verde Hills, he said.





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"Some people have arthritis problems. Some people have back problems. Some people have joint problems, and they come here to heal," Kamowski said.

He called the mere presence of a giant egg and fertilizer farm a threat to his business. He's concerned about the odor and aesthetics, as well as impact on the water.

Oscar Lopez owns Tonopah Family Restaurant, which is three-quarters of a mile east of the proposed farm. Lopez said customers and truckers from the interstate will bypass the area once word is out about the farm

"We're going to lose a lot of business," Lopez said, adding that about 70 percent of his business comes from outside Tonopah.

Mike Wirth is a co-owner of the Saddle Mountain RV Park, which was built in 1980 and is home to part-time and permanent residents. Wirth said he and his brother invested millions into the park with 344 RV spaces, 28 apartments, an 11,000-square-foot clubhouse and other amenities.

"I just cannot see how you can have 6 (million) to 8 million chickens within three-quarters of a mile of me and not create an odor or fly problem of some kind," he said.

Wirth's attorney sent letters to the Hickmans and the county Board of Supervisors warning that the farm could be a nuisance and damage the RV park business.

Clint Hickman, who was appointed to the county Board of Supervisors in 2013, said he has been careful to avoid a conflict of interest. He said that he has made it clear to the county that he isn't involved in any county issues concerning the facility.

"I'm more than happy to talk about issues of all sorts and types in the Tonopah area as they come to me, but on something like this where my family and my family company is investing money in the West Valley to expand our operations, I'm very proud of that," Clint Hickman said.

"However I have a role with the county and on something like this that hits so close to home, what I can do is make sure that anyone with any complaints or suggestions needs to talk to the people that will regulate us," he said. "If they have particular questions when it comes to the county, like air quality or something, there are agency heads that exist just for that purpose."

However, until the facility is built and there are complaints, there is no one to regulate the facility.

## Few permits required

There are two permits required of Hickman's Family Farms. The company must apply for a floodplain-use permit from the Flood Control District of Maricopa County, because the parcel is affected minimally by a floodplain, said Cari Gerchick, a county spokeswoman.

Based on a preliminary review, none of the proposed structures are affected by the floodplain, so the use permit will be issued, and a final inspection will be done to ensure that the buildings do not affect the floodplain, she said.

The Hickmans also applied for a dust-control permit, which the county Air Quality Department approved Jan. 30. The permit requires the company to keep dust to a minimum when building the facility.

There are no other permits required, according to the state and county.

Billy Hickman said the facility has support among some Tonopah residents, including those who have applied for jobs.

"I don't know that I can please everybody," he said. "Hopefully, we can perform at a level that they're satisfied that ... we're not disrupting their lives."

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